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Henry Irving, Towards 'A New Kind of Book': Publishing and the Ministry of Information, 1939-46

'The Ministry of Information has invented a new technique in publishing, and when our bodies lie mouldering in the grave I hope that fact will not be forgotten'. These words were spoken by Brendan Bracken during a parliamentary debate on his Ministry's activities in 1944.¹ He was referring to a series of large-format, illustrated pamphlets published by the Ministry of Information on the behalf of other government departments. Around fifty of these 'Official War Books' were produced between 1941 and 1946. Among the better-known titles are *Coastal Command* (1942), *Front Line* (1942), *East of Malta, West of Suez* (1943), *Roof Over Britain* (1943), *Combined Operations* (1943), *The Battle of Egypt* (1943) and *Build the Ships* (1945). Together, the books sold at least 23 million copies, and were rightly described by their general editor as 'propaganda bestsellers'.² These books have excited the interest of a small number of collectors, but their story is for the most part absent from our understanding of both the Second World War and mid-twentieth century British publishing.³ This is even the case in Valerie Holman's detailed *Print for Victory*, which focuses on the Ministry's often fractious relationship with commercial publishers rather than its 'more efficient later ventures'.⁴ To quote the biography of the Ministry's famous copy-editor (none other than C. Day Lewis), theirs was 'a publishing success which has never really had its due'.⁵

This article uses new research on the Ministry of Information to highlight this episode in book history. It is split into three sections. The first situates print within the broader history of the Ministry of Information and explores changes in its publishing policy before 1941. The second section examines the genesis of the Official War Books in more detail by focusing on the Air Ministry- sponsored pamphlet *The Battle of Britain*. The third explores their impact by using previously neglected figures relating to the print runs, distribution, and readership. The article will show that it is wrong to assume, as has the collector Anthony James, that the individual titles were 'not conceived as [part of] a series'.⁶ It will instead demonstrate that there were a clear set of rules to ensure that each new pamphlet complemented existing themes. While the Official War Books were influenced by existing trends in British publishing, it will also be argued that the Ministry's use of market research was pioneering. Indeed, the Official War Books can be regarded as part of an interactive 'communications circuit' which linked each author to their sponsoring-department, the sponsor to editors within the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry to a large reading public.⁷ To this extent, I argue, Bracken was right to identify their novelty.

Defining a Publications Policy

The Ministry of Information was established by the British government at the outset of the Second World War. Designed as 'the centre for the distribution of all information concerning the war', it was responsible for controlling the flow of official news, co-ordinating domestic publicity campaigns, and

¹ *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 5th Ser., Vol. 401, 29 Jun 1944, c. 822.

² The National Archives (TNA), INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1.

³ Anthony James, *Informing the People* (London: HMSO, 1996) and Anthony James, *WW2 HMSO Paperback Collectors' Guide* (Southwick: Anthony James, 1995).

⁴ Valerie Holman, 'Carefully Concealed Connections: The Ministry of Information and British Publishing, 1939-1946', *Book History*, 8 (2005), 197-226 at p. 204.

⁵ Sean Day Lewis, *C. Day-Lewis: An English Literary Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), p. 138.

⁶ James, *Informing the People*, p. 14.

⁷ The idea of a 'communications circuit' was introduced by Robert Darnton, 'What is the History of Books?', *Daedalus*, 111 (1982), 65-83, at p. 67.

producing 'National Propaganda' to influence opinion overseas.⁸ Although it has tended to be remembered for its early blunders, the Ministry became an efficient organisation: issuing thousands of words of news a day, organising exhibitions that were attended by millions, producing almost two thousand films and shorts, designing many hundreds of posters, and working with the BBC to define the tone of wartime radio.⁹ The Ministry's role as a publisher was no less important. Its Official War Books sat alongside a wide range of printed material including leaflets, illustrated magazines, high-brow periodicals, postcards, and posters. This was a significant part of the Ministry's overall output, and was regarded as a way to ensure that so-called 'front line' publicity like broadcasts had an enduring impact.¹⁰ The Ministry's publishing activities were more coherent and more ambitious than anything attempted during the First World War. Publications in the style of the Official War Books were also something unique to Britain.¹¹

Secret preparations for a Ministry of Information had begun in October 1935. By June 1939, it had been agreed that 'a popular series of cheap books' should be published on war topics.¹² Yet, before 1941, the Ministry focused on promotion and facilitation, rather than direct production. Put simply, it aimed to 'cause writing to be done rather than write ourselves'.¹³ A number of different strategies were employed to achieve this objective. In most cases, the Ministry would suggest possible subject areas to authors or publishers, and help provide access to sources. In cases where ideas were brought to the Ministry, it could help an author to find a suitable publisher. In other cases, it might prepare a manuscript in house, offering it to a commercial publisher as a finished product. The Ministry could also provide publicity, help with overseas distribution, and offer pre-publication guarantees of purchase. After the imposition of paper rationing in March 1940, it could also help publishers to access raw materials.¹⁴ To give a sense of scale, the Ministry's Literary Unit had input in some 111 different books published in July 1940, and purchased 32,000 volumes for assisted distribution in the same month.¹⁵

These policies have been interpreted by some as a deliberate attempt to obscure propagandist activity. In this sense, Holman argues 'propaganda was most effective ... when it appeared to be distributed by a trade publisher with no connection to the government'.¹⁶ Such views were held by individuals connected to the Ministry of Information. The publisher W.V.G. Vaughan, for instance, believed that editorial policies could be shaped towards war topics by the supply of features and

⁸ Although the Ministry of Information shared its name with a similar department from the First World War, it was not a direct descendent of the earlier body and its planners were conscious that it 'should not merely start off in the case of a future conflict where we ended the last. See TNA, CAB 16/127, Robertson, 'Creation of a Ministry of Information', 12 Sept 1935, p. 5 and 'Report of the MOI Planning Subcommittee', 27 Jul 1936.

⁹ TNA, INF 1/76, 'Censorship Traffic, 1943', 28 Mar 1944; Bloxham, 'Report of the Campaigns Division', c. 24 Jun 1939; Nicholas Pronay and Frances Thorpe, *British Official Films in the Second World War* (Oxford: Clio Press, 1980); and Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979).

¹⁰ TNA, INF 1/720, Minutes of a Meeting, 13 Apr 1939.

¹¹ Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1965), pp. 45 and 211-12 and Michael Balfour, *Propaganda in War, 1939-45: Organisations, Policies and Publics in Britain and Germany* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 432.

¹² TNA, INF 1/720, Minutes of a Meeting, 29 Jun 1939.

¹³ TNA, INF 1/123, Hamilton, 'Re-organisation', 22 Aug [1940]. See also, INF 1/123, [Parrish], 'Present Organisation', c. 15 Aug 1940.

¹⁴ Valerie Holman, *Print for Victory: Book Publishing in Britain, 1939-45* (London: British Library, 2008), p. 101 and James, *Informing the People*, p. 8.

¹⁵ TNA, INF 1/123, [Parrish], 'Present Organisation' c. 15 Aug 1940 and TNA, T 162/858/2/C, OEPEC Paper No. 405, 'Book Propaganda', 2 Jul 1940.

¹⁶ Holman, *Print for Victory*, p. 102.

photographs. However, this approach tended to be reserved for periodicals and magazines.¹⁷ To claim that the Ministry's book programme was most successful when 'conducted through outside organisations' is to ignore the later success of the Official War Books, which were explicitly marketed as authoritative statements from government. Indeed most of the books carried the Ministry's name rather than that of an individual author.¹⁸ It is also to ignore the fact that the Ministry's planners had always taken a very different approach to pamphlets and books than they had to more ephemeral outputs.

At the time of the Munich Agreement in September 1938, an eight page explanatory pamphlet had been drafted for direct distribution to every household in the United Kingdom.¹⁹ In March 1939, this idea was revised by a small group of independent 'publicity experts' who had been brought into Whitehall by the Ministry's planners.²⁰ The ornithologist and former journalist Max Nicholson was made responsible for revising the text. By August 1939, he was working on eleven different pamphlets, which would have all borne the Ministry's imprint.²¹ Some of the titles (like 'How You Can Help', 'The Struggle Ahead' and 'The Causes of War') had their roots in the earlier draft; others (like 'The Economics of War', 'Conditions in Germany' and 'Nazi Lies') were entirely new.²² However none of the titles would be ready for distribution upon the outbreak of the war, and most were eventually abandoned. The only title published was the sober 'The Causes of War', which appeared as *The Outbreak of War* in mid-September, when it was sent by post to an audience of no more than a couple of thousand.²³ It was this frustrating experience that led Nicholson, who was made the Ministry's 'Controller of Literature', to begin to consider new approaches to dissemination.²⁴

The Ministry's new programme of pamphlets and leaflets was to be based around an illustrated edition of the Foreign Office 'Blue Book' that recorded diplomatic exchanges between Britain and Germany before the war.²⁵ The full-length 'Blue Book' had sold 450,000 copies through His Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), and Nicholson believed that a popular edition could reach an even wider audience. The Ministry's Home Publicity Division agreed with this assessment, and began to combine an abridged version with the final report of Britain's ambassador to Nazi Germany. The process proved far from smooth. Work was disrupted by administrative changes within the Ministry and put into abeyance after a rumoured that funding had been removed. Although resurrected, the text finally became embroiled in a dispute with the Foreign Office, who feared that it would detract from the full-length version, and was almost discarded when Nicholson's plan for photographic illustration was abandoned.²⁶ The finished product was described by the deputy controller of HMSO as 'rushed, and ... quite unacceptable to the Trade'; and it was with some reluctance that he agreed to print 50,000

¹⁷ TNA, INF 1/721, Vaughan, 'Special Publications', 26 Jun 1939.

¹⁸ Hilary St. George Saunders, *Pioneers! Oh Pioneers!* (London: Macmillan, 1944), pp. 9-11.

¹⁹ TNA, INF 1/713, King Hall, 'Early Publicity', c. 13 Sept 1938 and Subcommittee on Home Publicity, 'Home Publicity under the Ministry of Information', 27 Sept 1938, p. 4.

²⁰ TNA, INF 1/711, Macadam, 'Memorandum on Home Publicity and the Technical Side of the Division', 18 Mar 1939, pp. 5-6; and extract from Note of a Meeting, 20 Mar 1939.

²¹ The 'Home Publicity' Planners did discuss the possibility of secretly publishing certain material through commercial channels, but were keen to establish the Ministry's responsibility for official communication at the outset of the war.

²² TNA, INF 1/721, Nicholson, 'Research Sub-Committee: Draft Programme', 19 Jun 1939 and TNA, INF 1/720, Minutes of a Meeting, 3 Aug 1939.

²³ TNA, INF 1/6, 'First Report on the Activities of the Ministry of Information', c. 18 Sept 1939, p. 6.

²⁴ TNA, INF 1/320, Nicholson, 'Programme of Future Work', 25 Sept 1939.

²⁵ TNA, INF 1/316, Minutes of a Meeting, 26 Sept 1939.

²⁶ TNA, INF 1/316, Minutes of a Meeting, 10 Oct 1939.

copies of the thirty-six page pamphlet under the title *How Hitler Made the War*.²⁷ There are no records of how many copies were actually sold.²⁸ We do know that Nicholson had resigned from the Ministry in disgust before the first copy was printed, and that 20,000 copies were given free to voluntary societies in March 1940.²⁹

This encouraged further rethinking. After Nicholson's departure, responsibility for publishing was passed to the 'Editorial Branch' of the Ministry's General Production Division, which immediately explored the use of commercial subsidies. Again, this was a pragmatic decision. It followed an approach from Oxford University Press, and came less than a fortnight after Nicholson's initial programme had been abandoned. One can even detect a coded reference to *How Hitler Made the War* in the Secretary to the Delegates of the Clarendon Press's belief that the Ministry were keen to use 'a semi-official channel' because 'the necessity of getting various Government departments to pass anything ... [had been] almost paralysing'.³⁰ The Oxford Pamphlets on World Affairs title *Can Germany Stand the Strain?* was used as a trial. It was written in collaboration with the Ministry, given to OUP free of charge, and subsidised by the guaranteed purchase of 30,500 copies at a 1d unit price.³¹ At the same time, the Ministry provided support to the *News of the World* for the establishment of its War Facts Press imprint, and the production of a pocket-sized pamphlet entitled *Fifty Facts About Hitler*.³² They were very different publications: one was a sober (and ostensibly balanced) economic analysis of the German economy; the other mocked the Nazi leader by juxtaposing contrasting statements from his speeches and *Mein Kampf*. Yet the emphasis both placed on 'propaganda with facts' was in keeping with Ministry's belief that it could 'attack the enemy in the minds of the public ... by the dissemination of truth'.³³

When compared to the Ministry of Information's own efforts, the trial with subsidies was a success. Over 10,000 copies of *Fifty Facts* were dispatched to newsagents and bookstalls within a fortnight, and were apparently well received by the public.³⁴ *Can Germany Take the Strain?* was aimed at an overseas audience, with 25,000 copies sent to allied and neutral countries, and 3,250 to the British overseas territories.³⁵ This experience would redefine the Ministry's publishing policy. In fact, when senior officials met to agree a new procedure for distribution in December 1939, their discussion centred on the stimulation and distribution of commercially-produced texts. It was decided that the Editorial Branch should focus on 'encouraging authors to write the type of book which the Ministry

²⁷ TNA, INF 1/6, 'Sixth Weekly Report on the Activities of the Ministry of Information', c. 25 Oct 1939, p. 4 and CAB 68/2/43, Macmillan, 'Propaganda: Appreciation of Action Taken and Its Effect', 15 Nov 1939, p. 1. This was half the 100,000 copies initially planned. See, TNA, T 162/858/1/E, OEPEC Paper No. 104, Minutes of a Meeting, 12 Oct 1939.

²⁸ TNA, T 162/858/1/E, Minutes of a Meeting, 13 Oct 1939.

²⁹ Jeremy Greenwood, 'Nicholson, (Edward) Max (1904–2003)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: University Press, 2007; online edn, 2009) [<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/89908>, accessed 6 May 2015] and TNA, INF 1/440, 'Voluntary Societies Section: Progress Report', c. 1 Apr 1940.

³⁰ Holman, 'Carefully Concealed Connections', p. 202.

³¹ TNA, T 162/858/1/E, OEPEC Paper No. 103, 'Oxford Pamphlets: Can Germany Stand the Strain', 12 Oct 1939.

³² TNA, INF 1/302, Hilton, 'Home Publicity Division', 16 Oct 1939, p. 4 and INF 1/6, 'Sixth Weekly Report on the Activities of the Ministry of Information', c. 25 Oct 1939, p. 1. The Ministry guaranteed the purchase of 15,000 copies.

³³ TNA, INF 1/302, Unattributed, 'Aims of Publicity', c. 3 Sept 1939.

³⁴ TNA, CAB 68/3/16, Macmillan, 'Propaganda: Appreciation of Action Taken and Its Effect', 5 Dec 1939, p. 1. It was followed in November by *Hitler's British Dupes: Fifty Facts* (London: War Facts Press, 1939) and in February 1940 by *Vive La France: Fifty Facts* (London: War Facts Press, 1939).

³⁵ TNA, T 162/858/1/E, OEPEC Paper No. 103, 'Oxford Pamphlets: Can Germany Stand the Strain', 12 Oct 1939 and CAB 68/2/43, Macmillan, 'Propaganda: Appreciation of Action Taken and Its Effect', 15 Nov 1939, p. 1.

thought would be effective'.³⁶ Despite complications caused by a division of responsibility within the Ministry (which the Minister criticised for being 'unnecessarily elaborate'), the Treasury agreed to these proposals and authorised a £3,000 grant for material to be sent overseas.³⁷ Holman rightly describes this as being 'one of the [Ministry's] most explicit statements' about its relationship with authors and publishers.³⁸ By 1941, the Ministry was sending an average of 50,000 copies of its approved titles abroad each month.³⁹

The Ministry's success in 'caus[ing] writing to be done' was greatly helped by its ability to overcome the strictures of paper rationing. From 3 March 1940, paper was controlled using a system of quotas. Publishers were granted an allowance equal to 60 per cent of the quantity that they had consumed in the first quarter of 1939. As government departments were initially exempt from the ruling, the Ministry of Information was able to exert considerable leverage over publishers who could be granted up to 50 per cent of the paper needed for books with propaganda value. Even when controls were extended to cover government departments in June 1940, officials lobbied hard for paper to be 'allocated in such a way as to give greater encouragement to the production of books'.⁴⁰ For instance, although the Ministry was given a formal allocation of 3,500 tons per year for domestic production, and a quota of 250 tons for grants, the Ministry of Supply agreed that adjustments could be sought if necessary.⁴¹ This caveat encouraged the Ministry of Information to treat its quota as 'political whitewash' – consistently exceeding it until the system was revised in 1942. Commercial publishers, meanwhile, saw their allocations cut to just 37.5 per cent of pre-war consumption. As Holman notes, this allowed the Ministry to become 'the arbiter of what constituted propaganda, direct or indirect, and to a certain extent, what was and was not published and translated'.⁴²

'Propaganda Bestsellers'

The Ministry of Information did not entirely abandon direct production during 1939-41. In April 1940, for example, the Ministry's Director General, Kenneth Lee, took copies of two foreign language publications to a meeting called by the Select Committee on National Expenditure because they were 'among the more interesting of our productions'.⁴³ Yet, like these pamphlets, most items produced by the Ministry were limited to an overseas audience. It would take another ten months for the Ministry to fully reconsider direct production for a domestic audience, despite suggestions from the Select Committee that similar material should be made available in the United Kingdom.⁴⁴ This delay was the result of administrative confusion. As Director General, Lee had overseen a number of changes, with the Editorial Branch replaced by a distinct Literary Division and a separate 'Book and Pamphlets Committee' (which included the author Graham Greene, the publisher W.H. 'Will' Stevenson and

³⁶ TNA, T 162/858/2/A Paper No. 179 'Propaganda by Books', 19 Dec 1939.

³⁷ TNA, T 162/858/2/A, OEPEC Paper No. 182, Minutes of a Meeting, 19 Dec 1939 and INF 1/3, [Dane], 'General Division Progress Report, 1st Jan. to 21st Feb., 1940', c. 22 Feb 1939, p. 2.

³⁸ Holman, *Print for Victory*, pp. 95-96.

³⁹ TNA, T 162/858/2/C, OEPEC Paper No. 405, 'Book Propaganda', 2 Jul 1940. This was a result of the Ministry moving into new markets after it abandoned a de facto ban on propaganda to the United States, see TNA, T 162/858/2/C, OEPEC Paper No. 414, Minutes of a Meeting, 4 Jul 1940.

⁴⁰ TNA, INF 1/238/A, Bamford to Cooper, 30 May 1940 and Waterfield to Rae, 12 Jun 1940.

⁴¹ TNA, INF 1/238/A, Minutes of a Joint Meeting, 12 Jun 1940.

⁴² Holman, *Print for Victory*, p. 82 and 'Carefully Concealed Connections', p. 208.

⁴³ TNA, INF 1/60, Bamford to Bevan, 5 Apr 1940.

⁴⁴ TNA, INF 1/61, Bamford to Bevan, 3 May 1940; Vaughan to Bamford 21 May 1940; and Vaughan to Clarke, 5 Jun 1940.

National Book Council member John Hampden among its members).⁴⁵ In August 1940, however, Lee was replaced by Frank Pick, who immediately began a second cycle of reorganisation. He aimed to revive the Editorial Branch by combining it with parts of the Ministry's Foreign and Empire divisions. The plan was eventually abandoned, but a new Publications Division did emerge from its ashes.⁴⁶

Pick, who resigned just five months after his appointment, was remembered by colleagues as a 'well-meaning but tactless man in a state of confusion' about his remit.⁴⁷ The Publications Division was nevertheless an attempt at rationalisation. It aimed to bring the Ministry's 'great bulk of written output' under unified control by combining previously separate 'Editorial', 'Production', and 'Selection and Distribution' sections (responsibility for periodicals, leaflets and ephemera was left with General Production). The new division was also to be staffed by experts. Robert 'Bob' Fraser, who had joined the Ministry in 1939 after a successful career as the *Daily Herald's* leader writer, was asked to become Director; J.M. 'Max' Parrish, a former member of the Book and Pamphlet Committee and previously an editor at the publishing firm Collins, was retained as his deputy.⁴⁸ Theirs was to prove a potent combination of journalistic flair and editorial creativity. Together they worked to define a new editorial procedure, and decided to shift the focus of the Ministry's activity towards direct production. Indeed, while the 'Selection and Distribution' branch continued to 'sieve' through commercially-produced texts, Parrish was clear from the outset that 'We shall in future be making more and more suggestions for books which HMSO may be willing to publish [directly]'.⁴⁹ This was the genesis of the 'new technique in publishing' about which Bracken spoke so favourably in 1944.

The Publication Division's shift towards direct production was heavily influenced by an Air Ministry pamphlet entitled *The Battle of Britain*.⁵⁰ The pamphlet was the work of the popular thriller-writer Hilary Aiden St George Saunders (who was better known by the pseudonyms 'Francis Beeding' and 'David Pilgrim'). He had been appointed to the Air Ministry's Public Relations office in the summer of 1940, and had been asked to produce a definitive record of the RAF's defensive campaign against the Luftwaffe. Working alongside the young Oxford historian Albert Goodwin, Saunders methodically combined operational plans and official records with observational reportage and material gained from interviews with returning airmen.⁵¹ His aim was to '[clothe] the skeleton of facts ... with the flesh of incident'.⁵² Similar ideas had been pursued in other departments (the War Office had planned its own series of pamphlets under the title 'The Army at War'), but Saunders was the first officially-appointed author to approach the Ministry of Information for editorial guidance. The Ministry's direct input was limited, but its involvement allowed additional publicity and promotion. It would also become significant after publication on 28 March 1941.⁵³

⁴⁵ TNA, OEPEC Paper No. 278, 'Proposed Alterations in the Organisation of the Ministry', 11 Apr 1941 and INF 1/123, [Parrish], 'Present Organisation', c. 15 Aug 1940. This complicated structure is satirised in Graham Greene's short story 'Men at Work' which was published in the *New Yorker* in October 1941 and reproduced in Greene, *Twenty-One Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1954), pp. 192-99.

⁴⁶ TNA, INF 1/123, OEPEC Paper No. 670, 'Publications Division', 5 Feb 1941.

⁴⁷ Francis Williams, *Nothing So Strange* (London: Cassell, 1970), pp. 161-2.

⁴⁸ TNA, INF 1/123, OEPEC Paper No. 670, 'Publications Division', 5 Feb 1941.

⁴⁹ TNA, INF 1/123, Fullerton, 'Broad Outline of the Work of the Books Section', c. 5 Jul 1941 and Parrish to Aynsley, 15 Mar 1941.

⁵⁰ Day Lewis, *C. Day Lewis*, p. 138.

⁵¹ Garry Campion, *The Good Fight: Battle of Britain Propaganda and the Few* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 281.

⁵² Saunders, *Pioneers! Oh Pioneers!*, p. 10.

⁵³ James, *Informing the People*, p. 25.

The Battle of Britain was an un-illustrated 32 page pamphlet bound in light blue card cover and priced at 3d.⁵⁴ It was an unassuming product. However, after being heralded by the press for its 'thrilling reading', it became a surprise best-seller.⁵⁵ On the day of its release, queues formed outside the HMSO bookshop in London, supplies were exhausted, and over 300,000 copies were placed on order. It was quickly realised that *The Battle of Britain* would outsell even the 'Blue Book'.⁵⁶ Parrish was eager to capitalise upon this interest and suggested that the Ministry should produce an illustrated version aimed at a wider audience.⁵⁷ Similar suggestions had been made before. Parrish, though, was able to draw upon his pre-war experience of editing commercial text books and encyclopaedias for Collins to show how it could be achieved practically. Although the link is not recorded in the remaining papers, he must also have drawn inspiration from the techniques used by the pioneering photojournalistic magazines *Picture Post* and *Illustrated*. The Ministry was well aware that these titles had a combined circulation of almost 2 million, and Parrish has been involved in collaborated with both.⁵⁸ In September 1940, for example, the Ministry had worked with *Illustrated* to produce a special 'Royal Air Force' issue for publication in the Empire. Like this, the revised version of *The Battle of Britain* included eye-catching diagrams, action photographs, and striking illustrations. It was priced at 6d, which put it on a par with commercial paperbacks, and sold 4.8 million copies in Britain within six months.⁵⁹

The phenomenal success of *The Battle of Britain* informed Fraser and Parrish's entire approach. It suggested that the Ministry could reach a large audience by offering a product that was affordable, well-produced, and cleverly marketed. Their diagnosis was similar to that which had led Allen Lane to establish Penguin in 1935, and Edward Hulton to establish *Picture Post* in 1938.⁶⁰ The Ministry positioned itself somewhere between the two. Its Official War Books would be written with a coherent narrative and were designed to be preserved. Yet, unlike Penguin, they would be deliberately targeted at a mass audience more common to a newspaper or magazine (an approach Fraser knew well from his time at Odhams). The titles were to be cheap, their content 'dramatic, human, [and] lively', and they were to be heavily illustrated. Indeed Fraser insisted that 'the pictures and captions ... must tell a continuous story to those who will not read continuous text'.⁶¹ Brendan Bracken later described the approach as being the print equivalent of documentary film-making.⁶² The ultimate aim was to produce what Fraser called 'propaganda bestsellers': books that would appeal to all audiences and tastes, sell in their hundreds of thousands, and become the subject of 'newspaper and radio publicity' in their own right.⁶³

The first test of this approach came when Saunders was instructed to begin work on a second book detailing the work of bomber command. Using a similar combination of secret papers and interviews with returning aircrews as *The Battle of Britain*, he quickly produced a paperback that promised to tell

⁵⁴ James, *Informing the People*, p. 10.

⁵⁵ *The Times*, 'The Battle of Britain: A Detailed Story from the Air Ministry', 28 Mar 1941, p. 5.

⁵⁶ *The Times*, 'Battle of Britain a Best Seller', 29 Mar 1941, p. 5. Extracts were serialised in the *Daily Express*.

⁵⁷ Day Lewis, *C. Day-Lewis*, p. 138. Parrish was remembered by his colleagues as 'a technical expert'.

⁵⁸ TNA, INF 1/721, Vaughan, 'Special Publications', 26 Jun 1939 and INF 1/237, Vaughan to Dumbard, 28 Aug 1940.

⁵⁹ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1. It is estimated that up to 15 million copies were produced when overseas licences are included in the total.

⁶⁰ Nicholas Joicey, 'A Paperback Guide to Progress: Penguin Books 1935-c. 1951', *Twentieth Century British History*, 4:1 (1993), 25-56 (pp. 27-8) and Colin Jacobson, 'Picture Post', *History Today*, 57:6 (2007), p. 42.

⁶¹ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1.

⁶² *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 5th Ser., Vol. 401, 29 Jun 1944, cc. 822-23. This could be read as an example of cultural convergence. See D.L. Le Mahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Culture and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 232.

⁶³ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1.

the story of a battle unlike any 'fought before in the history of mankind'. *Bomber Command* was four times the length of *The Battle of Britain* and was produced to a higher standard. Its stitched card cover was produced at least two different designs and there was more internal illustration.⁶⁴ Published on 7 October 1941, three months after the release of the Ministry of Information's acclaimed documentary film 'Target for Tonight', it sold 1.36 million copies in little over a month. Fraser thought that this figure would have been far higher 'if only the copies could have been physically produced'.⁶⁵ Saunders was rewarded by being made the head of special literary section within the Air Ministry's Public Relations department.⁶⁶ Fraser and Parrish used the experience to clarify a new policy whereby the Publications Division would manage publications on behalf of other 'sponsoring' departments.⁶⁷

In spite of the popularity of Saunders' work, continued success was not taken for granted. Fraser was, in particular, aware that 'The book is not an easy medium of propaganda' and was conscious of the need for co-ordination between official authors. His solution was to turn the suggestions provided by 'sponsoring' departments into a coherent series.⁶⁸ This went beyond the approach taken in other parts of the Ministry. Indeed, the Publications Division sought to match its outputs to a list of 'Ten Points' derived from existing publicity (the most popular theme of their programme was 'the projection of Britain as a progressive, efficient, equalitarian democracy').⁶⁹ These guidelines ensured that each book would contribute to 'the British war story' by exploring one part of the war effort. Each case study was consciously designed to 'stimulate the effort of all other groups through psychological force of example and the evocation of team spirit'.⁷⁰ This programme was adopted by the Ministry's Policy Committee in December 1941 and accepted across government. The Ministry of Information had been nominally responsible for commissioning published work since the outbreak of the war, but it was only after this point that it was able to exert any real control.⁷¹

The fifty of so Official War Books produced between 1941 and 1946 came in various shapes and sizes. However, Fraser's programme ensured that each passed through the same editorial process. Ideas would be agreed with the sponsoring department and a professional writer would be given access to 'cold facts taken from sources denied to the ordinary man'.⁷² Once the manuscript was completed, the author would be released, and the Publications Division would take sole responsibility for final preparation. The Editorial Section would first set out the text in proof, before selecting relevant maps, diagrams and photographs provided by the Ministry of Information's Photographs Division. These components were brought together by the Production Section. Once that was done, they would produce a Photostat so that Cecil Day Lewis (who took up the post of chief copy-editor in April 1941) could devise the necessary captions. These had to balance the need for precision with informality, and were one of Day Lewis's most cherished tasks.⁷³ The final proofs were sent to Fraser for approval before being passed to HMSO for printing. This five-stage process was specifically designed to allow for the successful combination of text and image. The techniques used were sophisticated, and Fraser

⁶⁴ James, *WW2 HMSO Paperback Collectors' Guide*, p. 29.

⁶⁵ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1.

⁶⁶ James, *Informing the People*, pp. 28-30.

⁶⁷ TNA, INF 1/123, [Parrish], 'Procedure for Pamphlets Edited by the Division', 12 May 1941.

⁶⁸ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 1.

⁶⁹ TNA, INF 1/123, Publications Division, 'The Ten Points', 28 Nov 1941 and 'Books and Pamphlets in Production or Planned at 29 November, 1941', 29 Nov 1941.

⁷⁰ TNA, INF 1/123, Fraser, 'Books and Pamphlets Programme', 2 Dec 1941, p. 2.

⁷¹ This can be illustrated by the fact that the War Office Public Relations Department independently published Ian Hay's *The Battle of Flanders* in 1941 and would publish three more from 'The Army at War' alongside the Ministry of Information before fully co-operating on *The Campaign in Greece and Crete* in 1942.

⁷² Saunders, *Pioneers! Oh Pioneers!*, pp. 9-11.

⁷³ Day Lewis, *C. Day-Lewis*, p. 138.

maintained that they made the books 'easy to grasp and exciting to follow'. He would continue, even three decades after the first was produced, to describe them as a 'new kind of book'.⁷⁴

The Impact of the Official War Books

Sales records compiled by the Ministry of Information provide one measure of the impact of the Official War Books. The remaining records show that none of the division's later books were able to replicate the success of *The Battle of Britain*. But that is not to say that they were unsuccessful. *Front Line*, for instance, which examined Britain's civil defence services and was the first text to consider the home front, sold 1.88 million copies in the six months after its release on 30 November 1942. Printing records suggest that this had not been anticipated.⁷⁵ *Front Line* was a weighty, large-format paperback and, priced at 2s, could not accurately be described as cheap. It was, however, vividly-illustrated and well-written (with the text provided by S.C. Leslie, the Home Office's Director of Public Relations). There are other examples. The opulently-illustrated *Coastal Command*, which was also priced at 2s, sold 1.12 million copies in January 1943. *The Battle of Egypt*, which adopted an experimental magazine-like format, sold 1.48 million copies. And *Combined Operations*, which was Saunders final text, sold at least 1.43 million copies.⁷⁶ These were four of nine items that topped a million sales. By March 1944, the series had total sales of over 23 million, and was making a profit of around £30,000 a year.⁷⁷ When it is considered that even the most popular wartime Penguin Specials sold only around 100,000 copies, it is clear that the Official War Books were a remarkably successful publishing venture.⁷⁸

The Ministry's success was not without its critics. George Orwell, for one, thought *The Battle of Britain* too obviously propagandist and wondered why 'they [could not] simply give a cold, accurate account of the facts'.⁷⁹ Potentially more serious criticism came in early 1943. On 30 January, just days before the release of *Coastal Command*, the literary agent Raymond Savage sent a letter to *The Times* protesting against the government's 'launch into general publishing'. Savage was angry that the book would come out at the same time as a commercial effort on a similar topic and argued that he could not compete.⁸⁰ This was symbolic of a broader unease about unfair competition. As Holman's work on the relationship between publishers and the state has shown, such concerns were expressed in a flurry of exchanges in the press and trade journals.⁸¹ The main point of contention surrounded the Ministry of Information's ability to access to scarce resources. The large print runs afforded to the War Books certainly required quantities of rationed paper which were denied to many commercial publishers. During the financial year 1943-44, they consumed almost 2,000 tons of paper, which was the largest single figure within the department.⁸² The books were regarded as exceptional by the Ministry, and

⁷⁴ *The Times*, 'Mr Max Parrish', 3 Mar 1970, p. 12.

⁷⁵ TNA, INF 1/75, Fraser to Royds, 28 Apr 1943 and INF 1/238, 'Weight of Paper Used during Three Months ended November 1942' and 'Weight of Paper Used during Three Months ended February 1943'.

⁷⁶ TNA, INF 1/75, Fraser to Royds, 28 Apr 1943.

⁷⁷ TNA, INF 1/76, Royds, 'Draft Submission to the Minister by Controller of Production', 23 Jun 1944.

⁷⁸ Joicey, 'A Paperback Guide to Progress', p. 34 and Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951* (Oxford: University Press, 1998), p. 485.

⁷⁹ George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Vol II. My Country Left or Right* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), diary 8 Apr 1941.

⁸⁰ *The Times*, 'Letter to the Editor: Government Books', 30 Jan 1943, p. 5.

⁸¹ Holman, *Print for Victory*, p. 105.

⁸² TNA, INF 1/238/D, Paper usage statements, April 1943-March 1944 and TNA, INF 1/238/C, 'Notes on Total Paper Supply', 14 Mar 1943.

there success was used to secure 'special provisions' (for example when the Ministry faced a 712 ton deficit in April 1943).⁸³

The Ministry's case for extra resources rested upon the contention that the Official War Books were 'the only way of giving the public of this and other countries a complete account of Britain's war operations'.⁸⁴ Similar arguments had been made by commercial firms who had benefitted from extra paper allowances to provide reading material for the armed forces.⁸⁵ For Saunders, who gave an impassioned defence of the government's actions, it was a matter of democracy. He regarded the books as a legitimate way of bringing the war 'to the knowledge of the largest number of people at the lowest possible cost'.⁸⁶ This argument was criticised by the publisher Walter Hutchinson, who dismissed the books as 'trash', but it carried currency elsewhere. One *Times* reader was even provoked into responding to Savage's critical letter. The writer stressed that:

By its enterprise in producing such beautiful books of national interest at such reasonable prices, H.M. Stationery Office makes it possible for the ordinary citizen of limited means to enjoy what would otherwise be a pleasure reserved for the more fortunate few who are able to afford the present high price of books produced by private publishing houses.

The letter concluded that the government's impressive sales figures were evidence that the books were a 'real boon to the nation'.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the decision to pursue 'propaganda bestsellers' had been based upon the belief that such texts would be a successful form of publicity. And this could not be measured by sales alone.

Despite his frequent allusions to high sales figures, this fact was recognised by Fraser. It was for this reason that the Publications Division asked the Ministry of Information's Wartime Social Survey (WSS) unit to conduct market research on its behalf in the summer of 1943. The significance of this should not be underestimated. British advertisers had begun to experiment with market research in the mid-1930s, but there were few precedents for this survey. The British Institute of Public Opinion had conducted a poll on reading preferences before the war and the more anthropological organisation Mass Observation had been experimenting with research into reading habits in wartime.⁸⁸ The WSS survey was on an entirely different scale. The investigation used a randomly-chosen representative sample of 6,000 interviewees, was undertaken by fifty five trained field workers based throughout the United Kingdom, and was written into a report by analysts at the Ministry of Information's headquarters in London.⁸⁹ It had three main lines of enquiry. The first aimed to provide evidence of the Ministry's reach by prompting respondents to identify titles that they had read. The second line of enquiry sought to better understanding the Ministry's audience, with those who had read the books asked to provide details about their education, work, and usual reading habits. The final part of the investigation used open questions to probe the books' appeal, and collect suggestions for future titles.

⁸³ TNA, INF 1/238/D, Bamford to Bretherton, 3 May 1943.

⁸⁴ TNA, INF 1/238/D, Bamford to Bretherton, 3 May 1943.

⁸⁵ Joicey, 'A Paperback Guide to Progress', p. 40.

⁸⁶ *The Times*, 'Letter to the Editor: Government Books', 3 Feb 1943, p. 5.

⁸⁷ *The Times*, 'Letter to the Editor: Government Books', 4 Feb 1943, p. 5.

⁸⁸ McKibben, *Classes and Cultures*, p. 485 and Mass Observation Archive, File Report 46, 'Book Reading in Wartime', Mar 1940; File Report 1222, 'Book Reading Survey', Apr 1942; and File Report 1332, 'Books and the Public', Jul 1942.

⁸⁹ The investigation used as an exemplar of the WSS's methodology in an address to the Royal Statistical Society. See, Kathleen Box and Geoffrey Thomas, 'The Wartime Social Survey', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 57:3-4 (1944), 151-189 (pp. 171-4).

The WSS found that 56 per cent of its sample had seen at least one of the Official War Books, and that 26 per cent had seen three or more.⁹⁰ This suggested that the circulation figure for each book could reasonably be up to five times the number of recorded sales. The survey also suggested that the books had achieved Fraser's ambition for additional publicity. 28 per cent of the sample had, for instance, heard about the books on the radio, and 19 per cent had read about them in a newspaper.⁹¹ The audience data was just as interesting. It was found that men were more likely to have seen the books than women; that there was a wider audience among younger people than older people; that those in higher income brackets were also more likely to have seen the books than those in lower; and that those with a higher level of education were more likely to have seen multiple titles. The most popular reason for reading the books – used by 68 per cent – was simply due to their 'general interest'. Though there was a small proportion who read MOI books but nothing else, the authors concluded that 'The audience for MOI books is to some extent the same as the audience for illustrated magazines ... and small topical books of the Penguin non-fiction type'.⁹² They also explained that 74 per cent considered the book's production to be a good use of the government's time and money.⁹³

There is no record of the Publication Division's reception to the WSS's report. However it is likely that it was greeted as evidence of a job well done. Certainly, in a 1944 review of its activities, George Royds (the Ministry's Controller of Production and Fraser's immediate superior) would claim that the War Books had quickly become 'an established part of the country's reading'.⁹⁴ The survey's conclusion that the books had 'made a complicated war effort more real and understandable' also chimed with the rationale that underpinned the series.⁹⁵ The WSS were, nevertheless, careful to qualify their praise. Their report warned that 'some groups of workers, [who] may be considered important to the war-effort, [were] under-represented' and drew particular attention to the under-representation of female readers.⁹⁶ *Front Line* was singled out as the best example of a text which had successfully appealed to both a specialist and a general audience.⁹⁷ These findings stood in contrast with other parts of the Ministry's publicity output. A concurrent investigation into cinema, for example, concluded that film was highly successful in reaching those in low-skilled jobs.⁹⁸ That said, the WSS were convinced that the Ministry could sell more books if it wished. They found that half of their sample would have liked to have seen more of the titles (including thirty five per cent of those who had not seen any). The authors' maintained that the Ministry could exploit this 'reserve audience' by improved distribution of books that emphasised 'the human side of the war'.⁹⁹

Although the United Kingdom was their primary market, it must be stressed that the War Books were not just aimed at a domestic audience. Many of the titles were sold throughout the British Commonwealth, some were translated into languages other than English, and others were licenced for commercial publication overseas. The popular *Front Line*, for example, was published by Macmillan Ltd. in New York and translated into French, Italian, Russian and Arabic. Saunders' *Combined*

⁹⁰ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', June-July 1943, p. 3.

⁹¹ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', p. 16.

⁹² TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', pp. 3 and 20.

⁹³ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', p. 23.

⁹⁴ TNA, INF 1/76, Royds, 'Draft Submission to the Minister by Controller of Production', 23 Jun 1944.

⁹⁵ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', p. 25.

⁹⁶ Kathleen Box and Geoffrey Thomas, 'The Wartime Social Survey', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 57:3-4 (1944), 151-189 (pp. 171-74) and TNA, RG 23/42, Wartime Social Survey, 'Ministry of Information Publications', Jul 1943. The survey focused on *Battle of Egypt* (1943), *Combined Operations* (1943), *Coastal Command* (1943), *East of Malta*, *West of Suez* (1943), *Front Line* (1942) and *Bomber Command* (1941; 1942).

⁹⁷ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', pp. 27-8 and 35.

⁹⁸ TNA, RG 23/44, 'The Cinema Audience', June-July 1943, p. 2.

⁹⁹ TNA, RG 23/42, 'MOI Publications', p. 11.

Operations was similarly successful. This account of Anglo-American operations was selected by the Book of the Month Club in the United States, selling 350,000 copies, and leading to its translation into twelve other languages.¹⁰⁰ Such was the interest, Saunders was sent on a Ministry of Information-sponsored lecture tour of the United States to 'explain how these official books came to be written'.¹⁰¹ The books were not just noticed in neutral or allied territory. Joseph Goebbels is said to have thought of them as 'model examples of magnificent propaganda', to which Nazi Germany had 'nothing which begins to compare'.¹⁰² This belief was echoed by Royds. His review noted that 'No other war Government, Allied or enemy, has succeeded in producing anything at all comparable'. The argument was clear: the War Books had captured a global market and had allowed the Ministry to showcase Britain's war effort according to its chosen frame of reference.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Publishing formed a significant part of the Ministry of Information's publicity output throughout the Second World War. This article has shown how the Ministry's publishing strategy evolved during the course of the conflict. It has traced a broad shift from the promotion and facilitation of commercially published texts towards direct production. These approaches should not be viewed in opposition. The Ministry had always intended to produce books, did not entirely abandon production in 1939, and would continue to sponsor external work after 1941. The shifts in focus owed more to changes in administrative procedure and growing confidence than a wish to 'hide' propaganda. This process co-existed with an influx of professional expertise. Individuals like Hilary Saunders, Bob Fraser, Max Parrish and Cecil Day Lewis had experience of modern publishing techniques and brought a wealth of knowledge into the Ministry. They were also willing to reflect on the commercial success of *The Battle of Britain* and use their conclusions to produce a coherent programme of future work. The Official War Books were the fruits of this editorial creativity.

The books published by the Ministry of Information after 1941 are an important case study for historians of communication. Whether measured by sales or market research, the Official War Books reached at least half of the British population. This was a truly mass market – with an appeal that ranged from those who had already adopted Penguins, to some who would not usually read at all. This alone is reason for the Official War Books to be reappraised within the history of twentieth century publishing. The fact that the Ministry was aware that it operated within what Martin Dauntton describes as a 'communications circuit' makes this more important still. The Ministry understood that success could not be measured by sales alone: books had to be read, and 'propaganda books' had to be believed. To ensure that this was the case, it used ground-breaking market research to better understand its readership. Bracken was perhaps wrong to claim that the Official War Books were an entirely 'new technique', but, with their information-based relationship in mind, he was right to claim that they were 'something new on the bookstalls'.

¹⁰⁰ *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 5th Ser., Vol. 401, 29 Jun 1944, c. 822.

¹⁰¹ Saunders, *Pioneers! Oh Pioneers*, pp. 7-19.

¹⁰² Balfour, *Propaganda in War*, p. 432.

¹⁰³ TNA, INF 1/76, Royds, 'Draft Submission to the Minister by Controller of Production', 23 Jun 1944.